



Translation, biopolitics and colonial Difference

Jon Solomon, Naoki Sakai

► To cite this version:

Jon Solomon, Naoki Sakai. Translation, biopolitics and colonial Difference. Toward a global autonomous university, cognitive labor, the production of knowledge, and exodus from the education factory, Autonomedia, pp.136-143, 2009. halshs-00919841

HAL Id: halshs-00919841

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00919841>

Submitted on 20 Dec 2013

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Translation, Biopolitics and Colonial difference

Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon

The primary imperative given to subjective formation under the post-Fordist regime of immaterial labor is, as Maurizio Lazzarato and Toni Negri observed nearly two decades ago, communication. An imperative that might seem like a moment of opening turns in fact into just the opposite: “The [post-Fordist] subject,” writes Lazzarato, “is a simple relay of codification and decodification, whose transmitted message must be ‘clear and without ambiguity,’ within a context of communication that has been completely normalized.” In the context of the new global economy and its migratory regimes, subjects of communication face the especially daunting task of accounting for enormous differences and diversities throughout and across global populations. Hence, if communication is to be effective, it requires an ideology of anthropological difference according to which the normalization of diverse populations can be universally instituted. Needless to say, in the era of post-colonial governance, such normalization would encounter impossible resistance were it to proceed according to a model of uniformity that would inevitably highlight the uneven relations between center and periphery. What is needed, rather, is a strategy of normalization that accounts for and includes difference, yet organizes it according to predictable codes. Amidst the litany of various biologico-sociological classificatory schemes that have arisen — often with disastrous political consequences — since the 19th century, none is more pervasive, historically persistent and considered to be politically neutral than that of “culture.” Culture provides communication with the crucial classificatory framework necessary both to preserve difference at a level acceptable to post-colonial governance and to ensure sufficient regularity in codification. According to this representational scheme, “translation” names the process of encoding/decoding required to transfer informational content between different linguistico-cultural spheres. Just as the post-Fordist subject must “communicate,” the nature of “communication” itself is strictly codified according to a grammar of pronominal identities and representational positions that codifies linguistic exchange according to an essentially predetermined representational scheme of mutually determined anthropological codes.

In contemporary parlance, “cultural translation” names the ostensibly ethical relation to the other founded on mutual respect for difference. Given the massive effects of lingering colonial difference, according to which “the West” is supposed to exercise a dominating mediation upon cultural representations across the globe, “cultural translation” undoubtedly constitutes an irrefutably progressive development in the recognition of previously colonized peoples. Yet as Boris Buden points out in his defense of “strategic essentialism,” the notion of translation utilized by today’s proponents of cultural translation is not the conventional, modernist one that emphasizes semantic identity and hierarchies of translatability and untranslatability, but rather a postmodernist one sensitive to the problems of indeterminacy and difference raised by the philosophies of difference.

In 2006, we published an issue of the multilingual series *Traces* titled “Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference” in which we presented an argument for articulating the indeterminacy of translation as a modality of social practice to the contingent commodifications of labor-power and the nexus of knowledge that governs anthropological difference. The call for papers for that issue

proposed to prospective authors the idea of bringing translation squarely into a politically informed discussion about the production of both social relations and humanistic knowledge in the context of anthropological difference inherited from colonialism. We did not hide our ambition to push the idea of cultural translation beyond “strategic essentialism” to present a new vision of syncretic knowledge and social practice that would directly subvert the anthropo-technological status of “the West” as both exception and a form of immunity. Central to this discussion was the notion of a biopolitics of translation. In a series of lectures in the late 1970s, Michel Foucault introduced and elaborated the assorted concepts of “biopolitics” and “governmentality” as tools for thinking about the way in which the processes of life — and the possibility of controlling and modifying them through the technical means — enter the sphere of power and become its chief concern. Foucault’s effort has generally been understood as an innovative attempt to introduce a new ontology, beginning with the body, that would provide a way of thinking the political subject outside the dominant tradition of modern political philosophy that frames it as a subject of law. “Biopolitics” thus names a quotidian sphere of ostensibly apolitical (or depoliticized) social action and relations — what Foucault calls “the entry of life into history” — that is nevertheless invested with crucial effects for the production of social subjects. These effects, far removed from the role traditionally ascribed to politics per se, nevertheless bear directly upon the construction of what is at stake in the formation of power relations.

In order to use tools from Foucault’s conceptual kit, however, we found it was not only possible but also necessary to subject the latent and pervasive Occidentalism in his work to a thorough critique while at the same time opening up possibilities for an understanding of biopolitics in a global context. The notion of a “biopolitics of translation” acquires conceptual validity and critical importance with a view to the specifically modern — which is to say, global — phenomenon of the linguistic standardization associated with nationalization and colonial land appropriation. Ever since the concomitant birth of philology and biology, modernity has been associated with the advent of a global cartographic imaginary that places peoples with no prior “memory” of migratory contact, or only “deep memory” such as etymology, into relation through the mediation of an imperial center. As the transition to a global form of spatial imaginary, modernity begins, linguistically speaking, when the project of standardization is extended across all manner of social differences to encompass diverse populations in the process of national homogenization (which occurs, as Jacques Bidet argues, on the level of world system) and domestic segmentation (which occurs on the level of “class” difference or structure). This process must be seen, in turn, in the context of contact with other global populations undergoing the same traumatic process of systemic definition and structural segmentation. The biopolitics of translation thus names that space of exchange and accumulation in which politics appears to have been preempted by the everyday occurrence of language. Our research shows that when “translation” is understood according to a representational scheme of the epistemic subject, it names not the operation by which cultural difference is “bridged,” but rather the preemptive operation through which originary difference — what is encountered when translation is understood as an act of social practice — is segmented and organized according to the various classificatory schemes of biologico-sociological knowledge emerging out of the colonial encounter.

Seen from this perspective, the modern regime of translation is a concrete form of “systemic complicity” whose primary function is population management within the purview of imperial domination. In other words, it is a globally applicable technique of segmentation aimed at managing social relationships by forcing them to pass through circuits on the “systemic” level. In our research on

the transnational discursive structure of both Japanese studies and the institution of the Japanese Emperor system, or again in the relation between imperial nationalism and the maintenance of ethnic minorities, we were persuaded that the geography of national sovereignty and civilizational difference that constitutes the geocultural and geopolitical map of both the world and the human sciences indicates an important kind of subjective technology or governmental technique that has, until recently, been thoroughly naturalized by an anthropological discourse of "culture." It is only today that we can begin to see how a multiplicity of disciplinary arrangements forming an economy of translation (in place since the colonial era but far outliving colonialism's demise) actually produces differentially coded subjects, typically national/racial ones, whose constitution is interdependent and, at specific intervals, actually complicit in a single, yet extremely hierarchical, state of domination. Our aim was thus to trace a series of genealogies within which "translation" is no longer seen as simply an operation of transfer, relay, and equivalency, but rather assumes a vital historical role in the constitution of the social.

Our research into the position of the translator within the modern regime of co-figured, nationalized language, shows a precise parallel to the logic of sovereignty. Just as Giorgio Agamben has shown how sovereignty is based on the form of exception (embodied by the figure of the sovereign), the position of the translator in the modern era has been represented in a similarly exceptional fashion. Our work has turned this relationship inside out, demonstrating that the regularity of the "national language" as a formation in which the (hybrid) position of the translator has been deemed irrelevant is in fact produced in a representational manner only after the practical encounter of social difference in translation. By proposing to look at the formation of national language through the ostensibly exceptional case of translation, we have been able to show that it is indeed a systemic, or international, technique of domination. This discovery parallels the growing awareness, largely advanced by Yann Moulier Boutang, of the crucial role in capitalist expansion played by the various forms of irregular and slave labor, rather than the regularized forms of wage labor. Hence, at the back of the call for papers for that issue was a proposal to displace the state of domination managed by the dual normalizing technologies of wage labor and nationalized speaking subjects with the inventive subjectivities seen in the exodus from wage labor and national language. In effect, translation appears to us as the social relation from which the critique of communication and its corollary "culture" as the reigning ideology of capital is most directly linked to a politics of life, or again, the politics in which life becomes invested by capital.

In the various exceptions that alternately govern labor, life and language, we begin to grasp the way in which "the West" has established and maintained its "identity" as a specter for the last few centuries as the leading, knowledgeable region of the globe that supposedly exports innovation and development to other regions. Yet the very concept of the global, according to which regions as such are imagined is intrinsically indebted to the legacy of colonialism. Although the colonial encounter produced the first truly global relation, "the West" identified itself as a particular and unique region only by claiming exemptive subtraction from this relation while at the same time undertaking unprecedented accumulation through originary expropriation.

The contemporary configuration of the West and the Rest along an immunitarian model is but the most recent development in this remarkably durable history. As the contemporary West prepares to inoculate itself against a slew of viral threats supposedly emanating from the Third World, it is well worth remembering that for the indigenous, pre-Columbian populations of the "New World," the

contact with Europeans brought far more death from disease than any other cause. It took nearly 400 years, we are told, for population levels in North and South America to reach pre-Columbian levels. This decimation of pre-Columbian populations by viral disease, often occurring in advance of actual contact with Conquistadors and European colonists, constitutes an emblematic event of modernity: here, we find the original form of immunitarian distance that disavows the destructive, expropriative relationship while subsequently preserving the account of that history in the codes of anthropological difference. The temporal inversion effected by the representation of this event is what authorizes the West to claim its “sane and civilizing” mission and repress its viral, barbaric history.

The presentation to the Multitudes list of our call for a biopolitics of translation requires more elaboration than we can provide here, but we would like minimally to address two points: 1) If “co-figuration” names the structure of the world inasmuch as anthropological difference is governed by the epistemological representation of translation (at the expense of the practical subject), then it could be politically pertinent to see something like a European reception of this project. Vis-à-vis the global networks of bipolarity established by the United States (which remains dominant in Asia), Europe stands in a highly ambivalent position. Undoubtedly some Europeans will dream of making this cause for a new European exception. But at the same time, this “rift in Empire,” to borrow Brian Holmes’s suggestive phrase, also presents us with an interesting possibility to displace the bipolarity. 2) Concomitant with this creative potential, we cannot overemphasize the necessity of a long-term, far-reaching critique, via the conceptual framework of translation, of the Eurocentrism and Occidentalism that still pervades the Human Sciences today. Previous critiques of Occidentalism have focused on themes such as colonial ambivalence and the reversal of established hierarchies, yet tend to leave the basic structure of anthropological difference intact inasmuch as it is linguistically encoded in the complex and mobile relations between major and minor languages; by contrast, a project in the biopolitics of translation brings to the critique of the West both an epistemological critique of the anthropological basis of knowledge and a practical engagement with the contemporary social formation at the level of expression. Just as the Marxian critique of the commodity fetish proposed to remind us that the fruits of labor, now reified, actually bear within them the trace of a social relation (and hence the possibility of creative transformation), we advance the thesis that translation can also be understood as a form of social relation requiring similar critique of elements assumed to be extraneous to the production of meaning and bearing similar creative potential. From the genealogical perspective of a biopolitics of translation, the emphasis is on, as Negri and Hardt propose of the multitude, not what we are but rather what we can become.

Crucial to that potentiality in the post-Fordist era is what Foucault would call the role of the “specific intellectual.” If anthropological difference coded as “translation” (understood, once again, according to an epistemic-representational scheme rather than as a modality of social practice) is the reigning ideology of the post-Fordist imperative to communicate, one must pay particular attention to the way the subject of knowledge, formed in the crucible of disciplinary and linguistic codifications still indebted to the legacy of colonial difference, is particularly prone to communicate according to a restricted economy of resentment. This is not so much a problem of colonial psychology in the Fanonian sense, but rather a more generally encompassing economy of subjective formation distinguished by the structure of return and the contradictions that riddle the search for recognition by minorities.

Undoubtedly, the struggle for control over the representational tactics of anthropological difference, as it plays out within and between disciplines as well as within and between nationalized populations favors the production of subjects bound by the expression of resentment. Control over the codification of this representational scheme invariably involves preemptively identifying with an exceptional position that is subsequently disavowed even while actively promoting its creation through disciplinary institutions. It is within this historical context that we can fruitfully expand upon Lazzarato and Negri's seminal observation that the role of the intellectual today "ne peut donc être réduite ni à une fonction épistémologique et critique, ni à un engagement et à un témoignage de libération: c'est au niveau de l'agencement collectif même qu'il intervient [cannot thus be reduced either to an epistemological and critical function, nor to an engagement with and witness to liberation]." Within the biopolitics of translation, the construction of collective agency occurs each time anew in what our research has called the mode of the heterolingual address: in this mode, as we have said before, "you are always confronted, so to speak, with foreigners in your enunciation when your attitude is that of the heterolingual address. Precisely because you wish to communicate with her, him, or them, so the first, and perhaps most fundamental, determination of your addressee, is that of the one who might not comprehend your language, that is, of the foreigner."

We propose, in closing, to see in the biopolitics of translation the form of social movement that corresponds most specifically to the intellectual laborer of today — a practice of knowledge, in other words, as a social movement of "permanent translation" (to use Radalvekovic's brilliantly succinct formulation) devoted to producing the multitude of foreigners we can become. It is perhaps only from this perspective that one can still hope, in this era of globalized civil war and unresolved historical injustice, for forms of collective agency capable of constituting a decisive break with the political subject of resentment.